

The Briefing



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Daniel 2-7, Harry Potter and Narnia

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It's a Sunday as I write this, and I'm speaking on [Daniel 2](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%202) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%202>) and [7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Daniel%207) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Daniel%207>) later this morning at a friend's church in Lidcombe.

[Daniel 2-7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%202-7) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%202-7>) is chiastic in structure; that is to say, if you have a story where the first incident is labelled A, the second incident is labelled B, the third incident is labelled C, and so on, then the overall story (if it's chiastic) follows the pattern A B C D E (and so on, depending how long your story is) and then you get to a point and go backwards until you get to E D C B A.

Sound complicated? Well, no more complicated than knitting a yarn. It's simpler when you see (or hear) an example. So here we go:

- A. We had a meeting and we planned an expedition to climb Mt Everest.
- B. We organized [Bear Grylls](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pA1Dxf7Uu_c) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pA1Dxf7Uu_c) to help us carry our gear.
- C. We climbed Mt Everest and had lots of adventures on the way.
- D. We stood on the summit and looked around!
- C. We climbed back down Mt Everest and had lots of adventures on the way.
- B. We thanked Bear Grylls for his help and paid him well.

A. We had a meeting and said “What a terrific expedition! What will we do next?”

You see it? A, B, C, (D) C, B, A. When you tell it like a story, it is simple and satisfying with a suitable climax right in the middle (standing on the top of Mt Everest and looking around), and each element in the build-up resolved in the later half of the account.

Now honestly, I’m not an expert, and wouldn’t have noticed that in Daniel, chapter 2 corresponds to chapter 7, chapter 3 corresponds to chapter 6 and chapter 4 corresponds to chapter 5 unless I’d read what an expert said. But once you do read it like that, it’s terrific, and you realize that the centrepiece of the story is that God’s kingdom overthrows arrogant and proud human empires like Nebuchadnezzar’s (chapter 4) and his grandson Belshazzar (chapter 5). Of course, the true climax of Daniel is yet to come, later on in Daniel, with the resurrection of the dead and the establishing of God’s eternal kingdom in Christ, but that’s another story for another day.

Oh, and as a postscript, a friend agreed with me that this all sounded very clever, but were there actually any stories today that corresponded to this chiasmic ‘ring’ structure? I think he was meaning to suggest that this was a theory that was possibly true, but simply too smarty-pants for its own good.

I was a bit stumped until [this article in Christianity Today](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/july/harryherestay.html) (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/july/harryherestay.html>) came to my aid. It says of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*:

Ring composition: The whole series, as well as each book therein, conforms to the touchstones of traditional story scaffolding. Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her book *Thinking in Circles*, calls it “ring composition”. She describes it as “a construction of parallelisms that must open a theme, develop it, and round it off by bringing the conclusion back to the beginning”. Bible readers might call it *chiasmus*.

Rowling repeatedly hits the three marks of ring writing. The Potter series and each novel have beginnings and ends that meet up. They have “centers” that both return to the question raised in the beginning and answer that question in the end. And, each book and each chapter has its mirrored image or “reverse echo” in the book or chapter on the opposite side of the story divide. “Parallelisms” define these stories.

So there you are, the most famous book of this age is chiasmic, and contains chiasms within every chiasm right down to the chapter level. I admit that I haven’t checked this for myself, but it’s a fun little exercise for a rainy weekend. And if you get to the end of that and are keen for more chiasms, check *Narnia*:

I think Rowling picked up this chapter structure from her close reading of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* and Charles Williams’s seven novels, which have a similar if not identical structure.

Then back to Daniel, and the gospel of Mark!

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